

The Boys Who Sailed Away

BY DAVID MASELLO



While scrolling through a website that sells art and antiques, I spotted a portrait of two boys in the prow of a rowboat, back-dropped by the blue of a lake. They were dressed in white and wore ankle-high socks. While they could be boys of today, something about their neatly parted hair and rounded collars made me think their portrait was old. Even the natural blush in their cheeks seemed, somehow, from a different time.

For days and weeks, I thought about the painting, talking about it with friends, revisiting it on the website. I knew nothing about the sitters or their setting — and yet I did, viscerally. I discovered that the artist, Helga Haugan Dean (1880-1959), had lived and worked in my hometown of Evanston, Illinois. Her painting dates from 1929, when she headed the art department at Northwestern University, which is located just blocks from the house where I grew up, a campus of buildings, paths, and greens I came to know well.

Upon learning all this, I called my first and oldest friend in the world, Heidi Olsen, who grew up next door to me. Her parents and mine were best friends in that classic mid-1960s way, with backyard barbecues, evening drives in convertibles to hamburger stands, and shared blankets for watching Fourth of July fireworks. When I told Heidi about the portrait of the boys and how much I wanted it, she insisted that I call its seller — the antiques dealer Berns Fry, in Bridgehampton, New York — and buy it. “I’m still thinking about a \$28 watercolor I saw 20 years ago at the Evanston Art Center,” Heidi told me. “I still imagine places in my house where it should be hanging. Is that crazy or what?” In fact, she was so impatient for me to call Mr. Fry that she hung up on me.

I did call him, and he agreed to sell me the painting for what he said he had paid for it — “though I wouldn’t mind just a few hundred dollars more,” he suggested, which seemed only fair. And yet, somehow, I felt that this painting was immune to the marketplace, that no one else out there would covet it, that it would forever be available whenever I wanted it. Those lads in the boat would always be waiting to moor in my home.

And so, weeks later, when I logged on to the website and saw the word “sold” in red type alongside the image I knew so well, I felt blunt regret. That painting was mine, I reasoned. No one could appreciate it as I did; no one else had a connection to it as intimate as mine.

I wrote Mr. Fry to ask who had bought it. He said that he had received competing bids on the very same day, even though the painting had been on his site (and in his shop) for years. “Dealer discretion and all, the most I can tell you is that it’s in the hands of a very wealthy and fairly high-profile gentleman who lives out here,” he wrote. “I can’t tell you any more, but I can assure you that it has found a good home.”

But not my home.

Why is it that a painting of people we don’t know — whom we’ll never meet because they’re no longer alive or are unidentified or live on another continent — can so speak to us, can compel us to have them on

our wall for as long as we live? I like to buy portraits, but I have never bought a painting that depicts someone I know.

I can be honest and say that some of the portraits I own show decidedly attractive young men and women. The largest, a nearly five-foot-square canvas by Tim Kennedy, depicts three graduate students from Indiana University, where the artist teaches. Two of them are playing cards on a porch on a summer’s day, with the central figure, a young man in a white T-shirt, dealing a new hand to a young woman. Because this painting hangs over the table where I eat my meals, I look at that young man’s face every day, and he at mine.

Another picture I own, by Jayanthi Menon, presents a lad sitting cross-legged in profile, his long brown hair feathered over an ear. I also own a formal portrait of an imperious young man, black hair dramatically forked over his forehead, and a small painting on panel of a shirtless figure reclining on a bed in Californian morning light. I bought two photographs taken by Diego James Robles, one showing an injured rodeo rider smoking a cigarette as he is being bandaged by attending nurses, the other depicting a locker room as a Cubist-like tangle of athletes getting ready for their game.

The two boys in this now-lost-to-me portrait — posed as they are before Lake Michigan, the surf of which I once heard from my bed when the wind was right — are simply beautiful. They are flawless, actually, in the way that idealized portraiture can be. And yet, they are real, alive, looking directly at the painter — and now the viewer who owns them. That they might have lived in my hometown, that I know where the artist might have posed them, that the setting might even have been the very beach I visited every summer day as a boy, makes me yearn for this painting.

Naturally, I wrote its seller again, indicating that I respected his professional sense of discretion, but also hoping that he might forward my contact points to the portrait’s “very wealthy” new owner in the Hamptons. I told Mr. Fry about the book on portraiture that I am researching, and suggested that I wanted to interview this collector, to find out why he was attracted to the painting.

This may be the first and only object I have ever wanted that I don’t own. Yes, I’d love to have a scene of Dutch domestic life by Pieter de Hooch, or a Cycladic statuette — or, in a different realm, an apartment with that extra half-bathroom — but I’m talking here about something I could actually own, something within my means.

It has been weeks now since I learned of the sale, yet I continue to miss those boys perched in the prow of their boat, imagining them on a certain wall of my living room, my introducing them to every arriving dinner guest, my telling the story of finding them and of their likely coming from my hometown. How they might even have grown up to be among the neighbors whose lawns I mowed or sidewalks I shoveled. But, like an unrequited romance or the coveted job unoffered, this painting



Helga Haugan Dean (1880-1959)

Untitled

1929, Oil on canvas, 47 1/4 x 37 1/2 in.

Private collection

Photo: Kevin Noble

is admirable and that makes us want to own that depiction of a stranger.

Maybe, too, there is something selfish about a love for portraits. If someone in a portrait I own is particularly lovely, I can gaze upon him or her as long as I want, without self-consciousness, without rejection from the sitter, even as I myself age. Likewise, I don't have to worry about the sitter aging in real life; I can admire or yearn, and my feelings will always feel reciprocated. I can look at genuine beauty that is not sexual in nature for me, knowing the picture will simultaneously adorn my home and make me look better when my friends visit. And, too, there is the simple admiration I feel for something I cannot begin to do: to paint. That a talented artist can capture the personality, the spirit, the character of someone — in pigments with something as unwieldy as a brush — is a kind of miracle to me.

As I continue pondering those two boys, who are likely brothers, one of my hoped-for scenarios is that the new owner will invite me to see the work in his home, and that I will be able to buy it from him. Or maybe I might see the canvas and not be as smitten as I was when it appeared only on my computer screen.

I do think there must be another reason, beyond the price, that kept me from buying it. Maybe my reluctance related partly to the idea that the boys represent the ideal of my boyhood, theirs having occurred decades before mine. Here they both are at the place — my local beachfront — that I still consider the most coveted place in the world. It's a way of life, indeed a stage of life, forever passed. Perhaps to witness, every day, a moment in their lives similar to my own would have been too disconcerting.

Yet I still feel, somehow, that the painting was meant for me. I came upon it by accident, just another item in the large inventory of a small shop on Long Island, not Illinois. Without any guidance, I sensed that its blue

water was that of Lake Michigan, and that the complexion of the boys was something found only in the Midwest, and nowhere else.

In a metaphorical sense, those boys in the boat have sailed away. I can screen-grab their image online, blow it up as my screensaver, and wonder if those two people are still alive, but they will likely never moor where I live now. ■

Information: bernsfryltd.com

DAVID MASELLO is a contributing writer to *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

is lost to me. I will get over it, but right now, that state of not wanting it seems, well, not possible.

Most portraits, it seems, depict the beautiful. Of course, there are countless exceptions — like the broken-nosed profile of Piero della Francesca's Count Federico III da Montefeltro, or the Walmart-scaled women of Fernando Botero — but the reason a portrait is usually made is to capture the fleeting beauty of the sitter. And even if that person is not attractive, something often happens during the painting process that imbues him or her with something: it may not exactly be beauty, but perhaps an inherent nobility, power, confidence — some trait that